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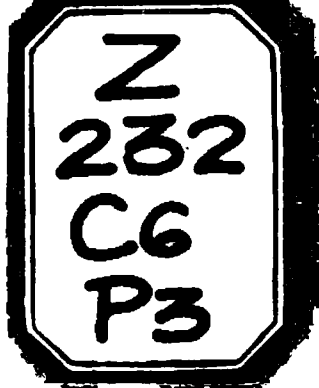
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GEORGE W. CHILDS.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

BY

JAMES PARTON.



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1870.

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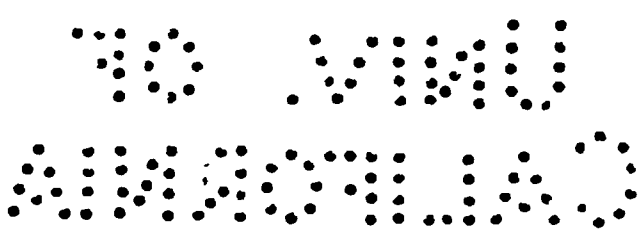


## A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

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TWENTY-FIVE years ago, when I was a resident of Philadelphia, there was one spot of that sedate and tranquil city which seemed like home; for it exhibited the vitality which New Yorkers are accustomed to witness on every hand. This was the corner of Third and Chestnut Streets, where was published the PUBLIC LEDGER, and where there was also the most flourishing depot of newspapers and cheap publications then existing in the city. It was always exhilarating to pass that corner; such was the bustle, and bright display of the fugitive wares of literature. The LEDGER then seemed as firmly established in the habits and confidence of the people as a newspaper could be, and it was still owned by the three able men who had founded it many years before. The Ledger building was solid, tall, and imposing, and the office wore that air of immutable prosperity which old banks and old newspaper establishments alone possess.

It had begun in the quiet way in which things of lasting importance usually do; and it had had that tough struggle for life which the strong never escape. On half a sheet of paper three journeymen printers from New York had drawn up, in 1836, their articles of partnership, had hired a small office, bought a hand-press, engaged an editor, and launched their enterprise—a penny paper—a novelty then in Philadelphia. They would have failed if they had been cowards, for they had not the capital to wait long for success. Luckily for them, questions arose which gave them the chance of risking destruction by doing



right. They *did* right; they took the side of law against influential mobs. When the medical students—a numerous brotherhood in Philadelphia—were disorderly, the little LEDGER defied and rebuked them. During the fearful excitement attendant on the Native American riots of 1844, the LEDGER courted odium by denouncing lawless violence, and nearly incurred ruin. When the abolitionists were mobbed, the LEDGER, though its corps of proprietors and editors disapproved their proceedings, defended their right to assemble and discuss public questions.

Such conduct as this makes a newspaper strike down its roots deep in the gratitude and esteem of the stable and the *subscribing* portion of the public. A newspaper gains by daring to lose. It never does so well for itself as when it gives widespread offence by being right a month before its readers.

In 1848, when the LEDGER had been in existence twelve years, it had grown past the perils of its youth, and yielded to its proprietors incomes ample and secure. They were still in the prime of life, and with powers strengthened by use and success; nor were there wanting in the establishment men of mature and tried ability, who might be supposed capable of taking their places when age should have disposed them to withdraw. At that very time the future master of the LEDGER worked in a portion of the Ledger building. He was not its chief editor. He was not foreman, book-keeper, or confidential factotum. He was not in the line of promotion at all. If any one had been asked to go over the edifice and name the person employed in it who was most likely to succeed to the proprietorship, he would not have so much as taken into consideration the chances of a youth, named CHILDS, who occupied a small office in the building. I should have passed him by as a person totally out of the question. And yet he, the almost unknown lad of eighteen, without capitalised friends or connections, with nothing to aid him but his own brain, hands, and habits—he, GEORGE

W. CHILDS, was the predestined person! The editor, who was a forcible and fluent writer, attempted mastership and failed. Other leading men in the building tried for the same prize, but with no memorable success. That boy was the man! *He* was the born master. *He* was the heir, though not the heir apparent. And, what was still more remarkable, he had already distinctly set before himself, as an object to be accomplished, the proprietorship of the LEDGER establishment. He had said to himself: "*I will own all this some day!*"

It was not the random utterance of a light-hearted boy. He meant it. It was his deliberate purpose; and he had grounds, even in his boyish successes, for believing in its fulfilment. In the years that followed, he made no secret of his intention; but often said to his intimate friends, "If I live, I will become the owner of the PUBLIC LEDGER." He said so to Dr. R. Shelton Mackenzie, nine years before he accomplished his purpose, and at a time when there seemed no likelihood of its ever being for sale, or of his possessing the means of buying it. The audacity of such a thought in a boy of eighteen can hardly be appreciated by any one who was not familiar with Philadelphia at the time, and with the solid basis of prosperity upon which the LEDGER stood. It was as though a poor boy who had struggled to London from a distant town, and obtained some obscure employment about Printing House Square, should quietly say to himself: "I will one day own the 'London Times!'"

The lad was a stranger in Philadelphia, recently arrived from Baltimore, his native city. His early friends in Baltimore do not depict him as in the least resembling the ideal boy of modern novels—the Tom Browns, who put forth their whole soul in foot-ball and cricket, and bestow the reluctant residue upon the serious business of school. With sincere deference to our honored guest, Mr. Thomas Hughes, I must beg leave to state, that superior men, who learn to govern themselves and direct affairs, do not spend their boyhood so. *Not* in the Rugby style do

the Jeffersons, Franklins, Pitts, Peels, Watts, nor the great men of business, nor the immortals of literature and art, pass the priceless hours of boyhood and youth. Such boys do not despise the oar and the bat, but they do not exalt the sports of the play-ground to the chief place in their regard. This boy certainly did not. He exhibited, even as a child, two traits seldom found in the same individual: a remarkable aptitude for business, and a remarkable liberality in giving away the results of his boyish trading. At school he was often bartering boyish treasures—knives for pigeons, marbles for pop-guns, a bird-cage for a book; and he displayed an intuitive knack in getting a good bargain by buying and selling at the right moment. At a very early age he had a sense of the value of time, and a strong inclination to become a self-supporting individual. He has told his friends that, in his tenth year, when school was dismissed for the summer, he took the place of errand-boy in a bookstore, and spent the vacation in hard work. This was not romantic, but it was highly honorable to a little fellow to be willing thus to work for the treasures that boys desire. At thirteen he entered the U. S. Navy, and spent fifteen months in the service; an experience and discipline not without good results upon his health and character.

He was a favorite among his boyish friends. One of them, Hon. J. J. Stewart, of Maryland, has recently said: "He was then what you find him now. His heart was always larger than his means. There is but one thing he always despised, and that is meanness; there is but one character he hates, and that is a liar. When he left Baltimore, a little boy, the affectionate regrets of all his companions followed him to Philadelphia; and the attachment they felt for him was more like romance than reality in this every-day world. \* \* \* I remember that he wrote to me years ago, when we were both boys, that he meant to prove that *a man could be liberal and successful at the same time.*"

Let us see if the career of the man has fulfilled the dream of the boy.

Upon reaching Philadelphia, a vigorous lad of fourteen, he knew but one family in the city, and they, soon removing, left him friendless there. He found employment in his old vocation of shop-boy in a bookstore. But he was no longer a boy. Experience had given him an early maturity of mind and character, and he was soon discharging the duties of a man. Paying strict attention to business, working early and late for his employer, disdaining no honest service, he soon had an opportunity, young as he was, of showing that he possessed the rarest faculty of a business man—*judgment*. After shutting up the store in the evening, he was intrusted by his employer with the duty of frequenting the book auctions and making purchases; and by the time he was sixteen, it was he who was regularly deputed to attend the book trade-sales at New York and Boston. After serving in this capacity for four years, being then eighteen years of age, having saved a few hundred dollars capital, and accumulated a much larger capital in character, in knowledge of business, and in the confidence of business men, he hired a small slice of the Ledger building, and set up in business for himself. Already he felt that his mission was to conduct a great daily paper; already, as before remarked, he had said to himself, that paper shall be the PUBLIC LEDGER.

In his narrow slip of a store in the Ledger building, he bestirred himself mightily, and thrived apace. Faculty is always in demand; and I say again, a young man generally gets a step forward in his career about as soon as he is able to hold it. Before he was quite twenty-one, we find him a member of that publishing firm which afterwards obtained so much celebrity and success under the title of Childs & Peterson. The intelligent head of the old firm of R. E. Peterson & Co. had the discernment to see his capacity, and sought an alliance with him. It was a strong firm; for the talent it contained was at once great

and various. Mr. Peterson and his family had considerable knowledge of science and literature, and Mr. CHILDS possessed that sure intuitive judgment of the public taste and the public needs without which no man can succeed as a publisher. He had, also, that strong confidence in his own judgment which gave him courage to risk vast amounts of capital, and even the solvency of the firm, upon enterprises at which many a more experienced publisher would have shaken his head.

There is no business so difficult as that of publishing books. Few succeed in it, and still fewer attain a success at all commensurate with the energy and risk which it demands. The very knowledge and taste which a publisher may possess are more likely to mislead than to guide him aright; and, accordingly, we find that some of the greatest publishing houses in every country are conducted by grossly ignorant men, who never read the books they publish, and who consider nothing but the reputation of authors, or follow implicitly the judgment of experienced readers. Such persons are never led astray by tastes of their own. They never think the public will like a book because *they* happen to like it, or suppose the public interested in a subject because it is interesting to *them*. There are publishers, however, whose tastes and preferences are in such harmony with those of the public that their own personal approval of a book is a sufficient guide. In the firm of Childs & Peterson there was much of both kinds of judgment—that which comes of general knowledge, and that which results from a knowledge of the world. Consequently, nearly all of its ventures were successful. They published few books, but they frequently contrived to make a great hit once a year. Mr. Peterson compiled a work from various sources called “Familiar Science,” which Mr. CHILDS’s energy and tact pushed to a sale of two hundred thousand copies, and secured for it a footing in many schools, which it retains to this day. We all remember with what skill and persistence Mr. CHILDS trumpeted the bril-

liant works of Dr. Kane upon "Arctic Explorations," and how he made us all buy the volumes as they appeared at five dollars, and how glad we were we *had* bought them when we came to read them. Nor was Dr. Kane ill pleased to receive a copyright of about seventy thousand dollars. Parson Brownlow's book was one of Mr. CHILDS's successes. It was not his fault that the book turned out to be absolute trash. He could not foresee that. Before a copy of the work existed, he had so provoked public curiosity, that it sold to the extent of fifty thousand copies. He had the pleasure of handing over to the patriotic author the handsome copyright of fifteen thousand dollars.

Mr. CHILDS, either by himself, or in connection with partners, was a publisher of books for a dozen years or more; during which he gave the public several works of high utility, involving an outlay such as few young publishers have ever been in a condition to undertake. No publisher's list has ever contained less of the sensational—Mr. Brownlow's book being his only venture of that kind, and that was an accident of an exceptional period. Among the massively useful books bearing his imprint, there is that truly extraordinary enterprise, "Dr. Allibone's Dictionary of English and American Authors," which is dedicated to Mr. CHILDS. It is questionable if there has ever been produced by one man a book involving a greater amount of labor, or one containing a smaller proportion of errors, than this colossal dictionary. Often as I have had occasion to use it, I have never done so without a new sense of its wonderful character. Probably when Mr. CHILDS undertook its publication, there was hardly another publishing house in the world that would have given the laborious author any encouragement; and it is safe to add that but for the outbreak of the war, he would have pushed it to a compensating sale. Other costly works published by Mr. CHILDS are "Bouvier's Law Dictionary," "Bouvier's Institutes of American Law," "Shars-

wood's Blackstone," "Fletcher's Brazil," and "Lossing's Illustrated History of the Civil War."

But it is not a detail of his particular enterprises that is required in a brief sketch like this. It is important to know in what spirit and manner he has conducted these extensive affairs, and what are the real causes of his success in them.

His career has not been all triumph; nor can he, any more than other men, justly claim that his success is due to his unassisted powers. The strongest man needs the aid of his fellows, and he is the strongest man who knows best how to win and deserve that assistance. Such a man as Mr. CHILDS makes friends. It belongs to his hearty, hopeful, and generous nature to inspire regard in kindred minds; and even minds that have little in common with his own love to bask in the sunshine of his influence. It so chanced that, among the friends who were drawn to him, early in his Philadelphia career, was the celebrated banker, Mr. ANTHONY J. DREXEL, a gentleman whose name in the metropolis of Pennsylvania is suggestive of everything honorable, liberal, and public-spirited. Mr. CHILDS is proud to acknowledge that, at many a crisis in his life, Mr. DREXEL's sympathy and ever-ready help have been a tower of strength to him. They have usually been side by side at the turning points in Mr. CHILDS's career; the capitalist being always prompt to lend the support of his credit and wealth to the execution of Mr. CHILDS's well-considered schemes.

In the long run, however, a man stands upon his own individual merits. No external aid can long avail if there are radical deficiencies in his own character. It is his own indomitable heart and will that carry every man forward to final victory. "There have been times in my business career," Mr. CHILDS once said, "when everything looked discouraging, and many would have given up in despair; but I always worked the harder, and never lost hope."

He was sure to remember a kindness, and was never back-



ward in reciprocating it. It has been a principle with him in business not to be blind to all interests but his own, and he has endeavored to act in the spirit of the old maxim: "Live and let live." "I have never been aggressive," he sometimes says, "but I am very determined in self-defence." While he has refrained from all operations foreign to his own business, he has given his whole mind to that; shrinking from no labor which its exigencies required, and never considering that anything was done while anything remained to do. He thinks that many who started with him in the race have failed to reach any valuable success, merely from not giving their whole attention to their business, unwilling to defer the enjoyment of life until they had earned the right to enjoy. "Meanness," says Mr. CHILDS, "is not necessary to success in business, but economy *is*." He has been an economist, not only of money, but of his health, his strength, his vital force, the energy and purity of his brain. It has been his happiness to escape those habits which lower the tone of the bodily health and impair the efficiency of the mind—such as smoking and drinking—which, at this moment, lessen the useful energies of civilized man by, perhaps, one-half! He tells the young men about him that Franklin's rule for success in business is about the best that can be given—simple as it is. It consists of three words: "Temperance, industry, and frugality."

During his career as a publisher of books he never lost sight of his favorite object, the control of a leading daily newspaper. The time came when he could gratify this ambition.

The PUBLIC LEDGER had fallen upon evil days. Started as a penny paper in 1836, the proprietors had been able to keep it at that price for a quarter of a century. But the war, by doubling the cost of material and labor, had rendered it impossible to continue the paper at the original price, except at a loss. The proprietors were men naturally averse to change. They clung to the penny feature of their system too long, believing it

vital to the prosperity of the LEDGER. They were both right and wrong. *Cheapness* was vital: but in 1864 a cent for such a sheet as the PUBLIC LEDGER was not a price at all; it was giving it half away. Retaining the original price was carrying a good principle to that extreme which endangered the principle itself; just as we are now putting in peril the principle of cheap government by condemning important servants of the people—judges, mayors, governors, presidents, cabinet ministers, and heads of bureaus—to pinching and precarious penury. Nor were the proprietors then in a condition to superintend a radical change. One of them was dead. Another was absorbed in the management of another enterprise; and the third was indifferent. This firm, once so capable and vigorous, had outlived its opportunity, and the PUBLIC LEDGER was for sale.

The establishment was then losing four hundred and eighty dollars upon every number of the paper which it issued. This was not generally known; the paper looked as prosperous as ever; its circulation was immense, and its columns were crowded with advertisements. And yet there was a weekly loss of three thousand dollars—a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year. Upon learning this fact, the friends of Mr. CHILDS, whose opinion he sought, said with decision: "Don't buy!" Nevertheless, he looked the ground carefully over; he made minute calculations; he kept on his thinking cap day and evening. He bought the PUBLIC LEDGER—the whole of it, just as it stood—for a sum a little exceeding the amount of its annual loss.

The purchase was completed Dec. 5th, 1864. A week after, the new proprietor announced the two simple and obviously just changes that were necessary to the prolonged existence of the paper. He doubled its price and increased the advertising rates to the compensating point. The first shock to the establishment was severe: subscribers fell off, and the columns were lightened in some degree of their burthen of advertisements. But a daily newspaper of any great importance is to large classes

of people a *necessity*; and the PUBLIC LEDGER was eminently such, for it had been for twenty years the established medium of communication between employers and employed, between buyers and sellers, between bereaved families and their friends, and between landlords and tenants. The subscribers, too, comprehended the reasonableness of the change, and Mr. CHILDS was not the man to neglect the means of bringing it home to their minds. He knows the power of advertising, and how to use that power. In a few days the tide turned. At the end of a month he made a concession of which no one who does not know Philadelphia intimately can understand the importance: he reduced the price of the paper from two cents a day to ten cents a week. What a trifling matter this seems to us lavish New Yorkers! But Philadelphia—leaving out a few hundred very rich people, who are the same everywhere—is composed of a prodigious number of highly respectable families, whose means are limited, and to whom severe economy is a thing of conscience, necessity, and life-long habit. Not because they earn less than the inhabitants of other cities, but because they are ambitious for their children, and because it is the custom of the place for all but the very poorest people to live with a certain decent and orderly respectability, incompatible with waste. Poverty is not regarded there as an excuse for squalor and dirt. Hence, the change in the cost of the LEDGER—the sole luxury to many virtuous families—was really an important stroke of policy, which restored the paper to more than its former ascendancy.

Behold, then, Mr. CHILDS, at length, in the enjoyment of the position upon which he had fixed his hopes sixteen years before! He assumed, at once, personal control of the paper, both as a business and as a vehicle of communication with the public mind. For four years he rarely left the editorial rooms before midnight. Himself a man of the people, in full sympathy with the people, he has conducted the paper in the interests of the

people ; and yet there is no paper in the world, the tone of which is more uniformly *unsensational* than that of the PUBLIC LEDGER of Philadelphia. There is a certain sincerity in the editorials which contrasts most pleasingly with the mockery, the chaff, the hypocrisy, and the cowardly indirectness which are such hideous characteristics of some of the newspapers of New York. Mr. CHILDS evidently feels that a lie is a lie, that an insult is an insult, and that a calumny is a calumny, whether it be spoken or printed ; and he does not consider that it is less atrocious to inflict a stab at midnight, from the safe seclusion of an editorial room, than to take an assassin into pay for a similar purpose. It is an honest, clean, industriously edited paper—an honor to journalism, to Philadelphia, and to its proprietor. Nothing is admitted to its columns, not even an advertisement, which ought not to be read in a well-ordered household. The adoption of this rule by Mr. CHILDS excluded from the paper a class of advertisements which yielded a revenue of three hundred dollars a week.

The people of Philadelphia have responded to his efforts with a liberality which has enabled him to serve them better and better. A new LEDGER BUILDING, ample in proportions, and furnished with elegant completeness, now adorns the city, and invites the approval of visitors. The public seems sometimes to bestow its favors capriciously—as if indifferent to the worth or worthlessness of those competing for its suffrages. In this instance, the people of Philadelphia have rallied warmly to the support of a man whose ambition and constant endeavor have been to render them solid and lasting service. No one can patiently examine a few numbers of the PUBLIC LEDGER without perceiving that, in every department of the paper, there is an honest effort to give the reader the most and the best that can be put into the space assigned. It is gratifying to know that a newspaper conducted in this spirit is one of the most profitable in the country.

Mr. CHILDS, now in the enjoyment of a princely income, honors himself by his constant consideration of the comfort, pleasure, welfare, and dignity of the persons who assist him. He has provided for them apartments to work in as handsome and commodious as the nature of their employment admits, and the building abounds in such conveniences as bath-rooms and ice fountains. He takes pleasure in compensating faithful service liberally, and loves to see happiness and prosperity around him. He has presented his assistants recently with insurances upon their lives, and has given to the Typographical Society an elegant improved lot in Woodlands Cemetery, besides contributing liberally to the Society's endowment. Care was taken, in furnishing the compositors' room, to give the walls and ceiling the subdued tone most agreeable to the overtasked eyes of the compositors. On days of festivity, such as the Fourth of July and Christmas, Mr. CHILDS is accustomed to provide for those in his employment and their families an entertainment of some kind, in which all can participate—the happy effects of which shine in their countenances and animate their minds for many a day after. In a word, his is a generous heart, that finds happiness in diffusing happiness, and loves to make all around and about him sharers in his prosperity.

How much nobler is this than to scrimp and screw for fifty years, blasting all the life within range by a cold, begrudging spirit, and then leave behind, as a heavy burthen upon posterity, a huge mass of property, which the owner parts with only because he cannot carry it with him! Posterity will have care and perplexity enough without being saddled with crude, injudicious bequests. But nearly the whole efficient population of the globe sustains the relation of employer and employed; and, as far as we can discern, this is an unchangeable necessity of human life. Hence we may say, that the welfare and dignity of man depend upon the degree to which the duties involved in this relation are understood and performed. A man in the

position of Mr. CHILDS can, if he will, render the lives of many of those who serve him bitter and shameful; he can discourage them by a hard, pitiless demeanor; he can corrupt them by a bad example; he can wound them by unjust reproaches; he can weaken them by excessive indulgence; he can keep them anxious by his caprice; he can foster ill-will, and relax honest effort by favoritism; or, he can simply hold aloof, and regard his assistants merely as part of the apparatus of his business. Mr. CHILDS, on the contrary, chooses to be the friend and benefactor of those who labor with him; and, as he has himself labored faithfully in every post, from errand boy to chief, he knows where and how to apply the balm that solaces the hearts of the toiling sons of men. It is for *this* that I honor him.









